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Reflection in action: constructing narratives of experience

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This paper examines narratives of experience from teachers' lives. It locates teachers as academic constructors of knowledge and uses the cases of reflective practice and inquiry in the development of self-knowledge. I explore teachers knowledge in light of my own understanding from literature, research findings on beginning teachers, reflections on my personal experiences; my development as a teacher overseas and in my country Pakistan. Most importantly as self-reflection I offer Pakistan's move to construct professional knowledge and my own attempt as a teacher educator to aspire towards that goal.

Introduction

Beattie states:

... beginning teachers bring a wealth of personal knowledge, understanding and prior experience to the professional learning situation, which provides rich resources for reflection and inquiry. This knowledge, most of which has been gained as a student, must be examined and reconstructed in the context of becoming a teacher and in the creation of a professional knowledge of teaching. (Beattie, 2001, p. v)

The philosophy of the above statement is based on a relational and narrative approach to teaching and learning. Beattie (2001) sees the teacher's life itself as a narrative of experience. This view is supported by Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1990) and Cole and Knowles (2001) who think of narrative as the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future. Beattie's notion of construction and reconstruction of knowledge is based on the constructivist philosophy that knowledge is constructed and not static. Teachers are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced (Dewey,

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1938). This philosophical perspective is grounded in Dewey's notion that people learn from experiences and reflection on those experiences (1902). It is essential to recognize through acknowledgment that beginning teachers come with rich prior knowledge based on their experiences as learners. This prior knowledge as 'personal practical knowledge' remains a central concern that is linked to the concept of a way that allows people to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons (Clandinin, 1986). Beattie's conceptual framework is built on the premise that teacher education focuses on the development of the 'whole person' who is becoming a teacher, and that it involves the development of self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and knowledge of working collaboratively, particularly in the classroom and generally in the school (Beattie, 2001, p. v).

However, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) argue that one needs to have a personal philosophy in order to understand one's personal practical knowledge. Such a philosophy generally consists of the beliefs and values to which one adheres. I believe personal philosophy delves deeply into manifested values and beliefs and harks back into the notions of narratives of experiences. Beattie's concept of 'reconstruction' is likened to Dewey's (1902) idea that there is no intellectual growth without some 'reconstruction', that is, rethinking and re-examining. Through reconstruction, teachers reconceptualize their personal and professional knowledge; they enter into new ways of thinking about teaching. Thus reconstruction, as I understand, is rebuilding old concepts and experiences in order to deal with the demands of present teaching situations.

Beginning teachers approach teaching with various ideas, images and beliefs of what teacher's work is like, based on their own individual past experiences—perhaps as a parent, child, student, learner, or previous work experience (Calderhead, 1991). Beginning teachers then use their interpretations of those experiences as models for reasoning about the nature of teaching and what teachers do. By reinterpreting these experiences or events through reflection, perhaps a more general understanding of similar experiences and events may occur (Carter & Doyle, 1996). All these can have a substantial impact on their classroom practices (Clark & Peterson, 1986). Beattie (2001) feels that this impact is the creation of classroom 'communities' that are grounded in the experiences and realities of the learner rather than the teacher.

Research findings on beginning teachers

Research findings (Feiman-Nemser, 1983) indicate that student teachers have a wealth of knowledge about teaching, and a considerable informal preparation for teaching. They draw from their own classroom experiences as students (Lawn, 1990), they bring their implicit institutional biographies (Britzman, 1986), and the cumulative experiences of their school lives (Goodson & Cole, 1993). These experiences inform the students' knowledge of their world, of school structure, and curriculum.

These experiences also provide the foundations which not only influence the way a teacher begins to teach (Raymond *et al.*, 1992) but also act as lifelong references for 'teacher identity', both personal and political, even when these foundations are

shaken by later classroom experiences. Through Ayer's (1993) study, the concept of teaching as an 'identity' emerges. Thiessen's (1991) study further discusses the emerging professional identity of a first year teacher, incorporating the notion of 'socialization', the idea that a teacher has an 'image' of the teacher she wants to be but faces problems realizing and sustaining this image in the face of voices and actions both inside and outside the classroom which want her to adhere to the more traditional, or social, role of a teacher. The process of 'socializing' is an influential factor, says Bullough (1997), in becoming a teacher. Teachers learn by talking to each other about their practice and then improving it (Goodlad, 1983). Teachers engage in inquiry and reflection, hence constructing knowledge. However, Nias (1986) raises the question of whether the workplaces and like-minded colleagues are influential to teacher identity and collaborative cultures. Contextual factors such as lack of listening to teacher's voices (Apple & Jungck, 1992) may lead to isolation (Lortie, 1975), or sensitive listening may create collaborative cultures (Hargreaves, 1994). These may promote or impede teacher's careers (Acker, 1999), causing them to leave their jobs or seek further development. Gratch's (2000) research enforces on the value of critical dialogue and narrative discourse as essential to teacher preparation.

Kagan (1992) argues that teacher education fails to address the primary development task of beginning teachers, it fails to encourage them to make their personal images explicit, to study pupils to compare ongoing actual experiences with their pre-existing images, or to reconstruct the image of self as a teacher. This failing situation explains the lack of connection between practice and coursework. This also results in beginning teachers having unrealistic expectations of their pupils, using the same strategies modeled by their instructors, and trying by 'trial and error' to manage the teaching and learning situation. I believe a narrative of experience could help reverse this problem.

Narratives of experience

Beattie refers to personal knowledge as 'rich resources' for reflection and inquiry. To process and develop these resources, they 'must be examined and re-constructed'. The primary method for such examination is the construction of narratives of experience. Narratives written by teachers make a valuable contribution to research literature. In recent years, this literature has included more teacher's stories about children (Paley, 1986, 1990; Coles, 1990) and teachers (Elbaz, 1983; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Kilbourn & Roberts, 1990; Butt *et al.*, 1992; Beattie, 1995; Orland, 2001). These works provide teacher educators and teachers new ways of understanding and knowing, in addition to giving insights into the complexities of becoming a teacher and of learning to teach. This kind of narrative inquiry research recognizes that teachers hold experienced knowledge and expertise, which researchers should try to understand through an inquiry approach. However, the question generally raised with a tone that expresses skepticism, doubt and even hostility (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) is, to what kinds of 'truths' these stories aspire. They may give life a structure it does not have, in this way fictionalizing the life of teachers.

In answer to the skeptics, the 'truths' of these stories lie in the formation of concepts. Clandinin's (1986) work conceptualizes the 'image' of the teacher as a central construct for understanding the teacher's personal practical knowledge. In this way Clandinin is able to address both teacher's practices and teacher's personal and professional experiences in order to offer a concept of 'image'. The idea of concept formation finds further support in Buttignol (1999) who uses story to focus on 'self in context' as a central assumption that personal knowledge provides the foundation for a teacher's practical knowledge in his or her pre-service teacher education program. Buttignol argues that it is only by nurturing and defending the self that one can keep the personal 'alive' in the professional in teacher development.

This innovative approach to teacher preparation through narrative inquiry is characterized by an emphasis on reflective teaching, a challenge to the traditional model (Ziechner, 1983, 1992). Those who advocate systematic reflection in and on action (Schön, 1987; Ashcroft, 1992) recognize the need to build, with ongoing support for teachers, upon implicit knowledge gained through experience. New developmental models bring development based on research studies in teacher thinking and teacher development (Lieberman, 1995). The notion of teacher development as 'self-understanding' involves changing the person the teacher is or thinks he or she is (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). This means teachers, through the process of self-reflection on their personal and practical knowledge of teaching (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), may undergo a change in teaching behavior, attitudes and beliefs. However, they argue that the job of teaching itself does not offer much opportunity for reflection. Therefore teachers should be given the leeway for reflection that teaching itself denies them. If teachers were given time and tools for reflection (journaling, letter writing, picturing, etc) they would become reflective practitioners.

The practices of reflective inquiry in teacher education is emphasized in the work of researchers Conle (2000) and Buttignol (1999). Their reflective approach to teacher education presents the teacher as an active agent in the construction of professional knowledge. Reflection and inquiry are two ways of translating Dewey's concepts into practical methodology for educational research and reform (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). All these studies stress the importance of reflective inquiry in teaching.

Reflection on my personal experiences

The way I learned was the way I taught from 1972 to 1994. Based on my past experiences, I emulated my role models; these included my grandmother, mother and 'good' schoolteachers. I also learned by observing the 'expert' teachers, the ones found in my teacher-training program from where I acquired a strong content knowledge and the ones found in community services, which contributed to my affective domain. My students' outcomes were promising, so my 'kind' of teaching was accepted. In 1994 when I joined the Institute for Educational Development (IED), a whole new world opened for me. This new pedagogical and skill-based knowledge initially frightened me. It created a dissonance in my being. My M.Ed. degree encouraged me to

challenge my ways of thinking. The construction of new knowledge from my prior knowledge helped me construct and reconstruct new ways of learning and teaching, using ongoing reflection and inquiry in my teaching. By assisting with teacher education programs, I learned to plan, implement, reflect, modify, and replan my courses. I learned to work collaboratively and was able to have an intellectual discourse with my colleagues. By writing my own reflective journal, I found ways to overcome my frustrations and challenges. I learned much through my impact studies on in-service teachers and their fears, frustrations, initiatives, expectations and approaches to innovative teaching. All this time I was going through a stage of metamorphosis without explicitly knowing that I was constructing and reconstructing my personal and professional knowledge. My students' reflective journals contributed to my understanding of their processes of learning. Constructive feedback from my instructors and colleagues led to professional growth and development. The support of experienced staff at IED helped me to improve as a teacher.

I have recently discovered during my course at OISE U/T that by telling and retelling my narratives of experiences of teaching and learning in the classroom, I have been able to identify my personal practical knowledge. With further self-conscious reflection and inquiry on my practice and my research with an OISE/UT beginning teacher, I have been able to process and reconstruct my personal practical knowledge and transform my thinking about my own teaching and learning. For me even recounting this experience now is learning since as Schön (1987) notes, it is by reflective practice that we evaluate and learn from our experiences. This narrative inquiry type of educational research is the construction of a story, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert; the researcher is among the characters in that story. The story narrative is a natural medium since it deals with human actions and intentions, and mediates between the cultural context and their actual worlds. Bruner (1990, p. 34) states it is the culture that shapes human life, and it is the human mind that gives meaning to actions by situating their intentions in the cultural systems. Therefore, eliciting and understanding the craft of teachers that usually tends to be and remain tacit (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992) must be seen as ways of life that characterize teachers' lives and actions.

Hence, narratives organize experience, therefore listening to the 'story' of my OISE/UT beginning teacher research participant 'Laura', to her perspectives on learning to teach, and to her voice as she spoke of her concerns, important issues, and the way she experiences her pre-service learning, has helped me to gain deeper insights into the complex nature of becoming a teacher and learning to teach. As Beattie (1995) contends, all this reflection provides teacher educators and prospective teachers with new possibilities and new ways of understanding professional knowledge and ways of knowing. Within this scope of research, I have constructed and reconstructed into story my own teaching and learning experiences through the research community in this area. My work as a researcher in this field of narrative inquiry has helped me in constructing my own knowledge as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher.

Together 'Laura' and 'I' constructed our shared understanding. It was interesting how much we learned from each other simply by telling and retelling our experiences. I learned those problems we faced as teachers may be universal, whether from

a developed or a developing world. Teachers encounter similar problems and need to talk about them in order to confront and eventually solve them.

My study with 'Laura' has brought a new meaning of reality to me for teacher's professional and personal life. The knowledge, insights and understandings gained from this experience have provided me with alternate ways of thinking about the life of a teacher: in her context, in the way her personal practical knowledge develops, in her hopes, feelings, desires, emotions, intentions, and outcomes, and in the pre-service teacher education experiences. Interestingly, I also learned how similar and yet how different 'Laura' and I are as teachers.

'Laura' has helped me to discover my own personal practical knowledge by trusting me, in spite of cultural contrast. Because this process 'worked' for me, a Pakistani, maybe it will 'work' for other teachers in my country, especially the beginning ones.

Pakistan's move to reconstruct professional knowledge

While I am excited about the possible effectiveness of self-reflective teacher training in Pakistan. I am still apprehensive about its acceptance there. The major reason for my apprehension is the current, dominated mode of education. Students are generally not encouraged to participate actively in their own learning. Generally students receive a very rigid and authoritative education based on traditional teaching methods of 'chalk and talk', what Freire (1970) refers to as the 'banking concept', lectures through prescribed textbooks, teacher-centered teaching style (Kanu, 1998), and rote learning (Khan, 2000). Students are generally not encouraged to participate actively in their own learning. This type of teaching and learning influences students in their own teaching when they become teachers. They teach the same way they have learned (Bacchus, 1997). Therefore, self-reflected teaching is nearly opposite to the current situation.

In Pakistan, a majority of the teachers who come to the teaching profession are unskilled and unqualified, with low academic levels, lack of skills and competences. Low status and salary of teachers, time constraints, and continuing domestic responsibilities and commitment are common. Teaching is the only job available that, in many cases, does not require a formal qualification. Teacher 'individualism' is associated with qualities of uncertainty and anxiety (Lortie, 1975). School pressures lead teachers to rely on 'orthodox' traditional doctrines and their own experiences as students when forming their own styles and strategies of teaching. Lack of support and opportunities plus other negative factors lead many teachers to become deskilled, burned-out, frustrated and forced to leave the profession. These are some of the experiences that remain vivid in my memory, for I am a product of that same system. With this narrow landscape of teacher-learning and teaching, I feel many teachers may not be able or willing to share their past experiences. These 'rich resources' and 'a wealth of knowledge', as Beattie calls them, are 'devalued' in today's Pakistani market. Most teachers only have the approach or experience of one kind of teaching, through no fault of their own. I do acknowledge that Pakistani teachers come with tacit and contextual knowledge on training programs. Warwick and Reimers (1995) study further identifies other obstacles such as teachers' lack of skills and the diversity of

languages spoken by the teachers in the training groups. However, this is caused because teachers have not been able to reflect on their knowledge, and practice on their skills therefore it has remained static and dormant.

As a result of this existing unsatisfactory situation in the teaching profession, the need in Pakistan today is for a professional development program which will strive to create more 'professional' teachers, to train those now in the field to reflect upon their current practice, to help them acquire new skills and strategies, and to assist them in using skills within their own situations in order to improve upon their personal and professional lives. A number of teacher education institutions in Pakistan, including the Institute for Educational Development (IED) established in 1994, are working towards developing just such a program. The concept of education at IED is guided by the following principles: that it provides field-based 'on the job' learning, reflective practice through self-inquiry of classroom practice, and classroom-based research. It is here at IED that I teach innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

With my 'new' understanding constructed on my prior knowledge acquired from literature, with my practical experience of going through the construction of personal and practical knowledge as ways of 'knowing' with a beginning teacher, and with my day-to-day reflections, I believe I am now in a better position and can contribute towards reprofessionalizing teachers in Pakistan. For me, Beattie's reconstruction of personal knowledge no longer remains a theory or rhetoric, but is now a lived experience. By accepting and acknowledging their images and beliefs, by listening to their voices of experience, and by taking them through the process of self-reflection and inquiry, I feel I may now help Pakistani beginning teachers to examine their own personal knowledge. Giving teachers constructive feedback on their practice and allowing them to narrate their experiences with me and other colleagues will eventually lead them to construct and reconstruct their personal and professional knowledge.

Conclusion

I have examined Beattie's (2001) statement in the light of my own understanding and with reference to literature. I have shared some research findings on beginning teachers and have explained narratives experience, self-reflection, and inquiry. I have reflected upon my own experience of construction and reconstructed of my personal professional knowledge. Finally, I have painted Pakistan's dismal landscape—but with optimism and hope for Pakistan's move towards the reprofessionalization of its teachers (National Education Policy, 2000), an optimism aided by the submission of my own small attempts as a teacher educator based on my newly constructed knowledge.

I believe it is not that Pakistani teachers do not 'want' to change or improve their practice, but simply that they do not know 'how'. My literature search and research studies have equipped me to look for ways to incorporate this approach. I am confident that by acknowledging teachers' prior experiences and leading them to become self-inquirers and reflectors of their practice I may help teachers to examine and reconstruct their existing concepts in teaching. I plan to initiate this approach as a pilot project at my university with a few beginning teachers upon my return.

Notes on contributor

Nilofar Aziz Vazir is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of M.Ed. Programmes at The Aga Khan University–Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan. Her areas of interest and expertise in teaching are Early Childhood Education and Development; Curriculum; Teaching; Learning and Assessment, and Biographical and Childhood Research. She has completed her Ph.D in Teacher Education at the University of Toronto, Canada. She has a Masters in Teacher Education from the Institute for Educational Development, The Aga Khan University (AKU-IED) Karachi, Pakistan. She has presented papers at different conferences such as ICSEI, CIES, Childhoods-2005 and published articles on Increasing the Angle of Education Reform in Pakistan through Professional Development; Curriculum as Practiced in Pakistan; Research Ethics: Significance, Application and Obligation to the Practice of Research; How Students Learn about Right and Wrong in First Year of a Pakistani Private School, and Educational Development Projects at IED: Towards School Improvement. She was honored by Al-Murtaza School System in recognition of her continuous guidance, support and inspirational role in promoting professional development at the Al-Murtaza School Network Leading it towards Academic Excellence.

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